
Ecuador: Social and environmental impacts of oil palm

The Palmeras del Ecuador Company was established in the Ecuadorian Amazon, in the Province of Sucumbios, Shushufindi Canton, at the end of the seventies.

The former Institute for Agrarian Reform and Settlement (Instituto de Reforma Agraria y Colonización - IERAC) granted a concession to the company of 10,000 hectares of land, considered to be “waste land,” deliberately ignoring that these were ancestral lands of the Indigenous Siona and Secoya peoples and nationalities. This led to their almost complete extermination because of the occupation of their lands.

The method used by the company to install its palm plantations was to clearcut the entire rainforest, build drainage to dry out the marshy areas and use herbicides to kill off the weeds. As a result, the tropical forest in the area was totally destroyed. According to local testimonials “the palm lords took the best land and the peasants took the land that was left over.”

People from the community and men coming from outside work in the company’s plantations. Among the workers there are two situations: those who work under a signed contract and those who have no contract. In the first case they have health insurance, social security and legal guarantees. This is not the case with those who work without a contract and who are not protected by the law.

Women who work in the plantations have to do the same work as the men. Each person – man or woman – is responsible for a certain number of plots and the work done is measured by: 1) the number of trees pruned; 2) the number of bunches cut and loaded; 3) gathering and cleaning of seeds on the ground; 4) clearing the land, by cutting the woodland in the whole plot and leaving the land clean.

A local woman tells us: “we have no protection...if we are pregnant we have none of the benefits of the law, the office workers do have this right, but us women who work in the plantations, we don’t have it.”

Spraying is an activity carried out by men and by women, with back-packs loading 12 litres. Very often those who have been spraying come home feeling dizzy, their bodies ache and they feel nauseous because of the chemicals used in spraying. One woman tells us that her son “was spraying and he started to get patches all over his body, his skin got mottled and he had a boil, his body became ugly, he didn’t even want to get up, the company people took him away and put in a drip, they had him there all day and he came back better. After that he became frightened and went off to Santo Domingo.”

In addition to suffering from the same problems as the men when they also work, they are also affected when they don’t. A woman explained this situation by saying: “For us women, caring for the family, the children and the husbands who work in the company is a worry. When they come back sick we have to spend a lot of money on medicine to cure them. The days they are sick they don’t go to work and therefore don’t earn. We have to leave our daily chores and therefore we too don’t earn

our living. It is a lot of expense.”

A special problem is that of water pollution. Although the populated centre has tap water coming from a well, the people used the river Raya to wash clothes and for recreational activities such as bathing and children’s games. Today it is known as “dirty river,” it is in the middle of the palm plantation and absolutely polluted. When people bathe in the river they come out with their whole body itching. It has been observed that a lot of drainage in the plantation ends up in the river. Both spraying products and waste from washing the pumps end up in the marshes and eventually the water reaches the river. Those who are not aware of this and drink water from the marshes or drainage suffer from diarrhoea and vomiting.”

Another problem affecting both the health and the economy of the local population is the so called “Stable Fly.” This plague originates from the Palmeras del Ecuador Company’s practice of fertilizing the land by placing around each plant the waste left from the bunches of palm fruit. The community complains that the fly breeds in the places where this waste is left. They say that “it is a fierce fly that stings all the animals, the cows, the horses and even the pigs, it also stings people, and the sting of these flies is severe.”

The problem is serious: “the quantity of flies is such that the animals’ heads are black with so many flies. When the flies sting the animals they try to run away and go into the forest, so we have to go and look for them until we find them. With the flies attacking, the cattle can’t eat in peace. During the day the cattle don’t eat, they go out at night so the flies don’t bother them.”

On applying the waste around the palm trees and causing the fly to proliferate, peasant economy is seriously affected because the cattle – an important source of the peasants’ livelihood – on being attacked by the flies do not eat properly, getting thin and not producing any milk and in some cases, even dying. Furthermore, the animals escape from the areas where there are more flies and leave the peasants’ farms so they have to spend a lot of time in recovering their animals and neglect other tasks on the farm.

What the company calls “stable fly” and many local people call the “fierce fly” is also a problem to health and those most affected are children. It causes fevers, headaches and skin irritation.

In spite of the pressure, the company continues to fertilize with this waste and, because it coincides with the pressure the company is exerting on the peasants to sell their farms, it leads us to suppose that the application of waste is also a measure to force the sales. It is interesting to note a testimony saying that “here in the populated centre the fly has not attacked with any force because the company does not put any waste nearby.” However where it does put the waste is “where the farms are, where the cattle is and that is where it bothers.”

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